Perceived fairness and satisfaction with the division of housework among dual-earner couples in Italy

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ABSTRACT

A well-documented paradox in family literature is that the majority of married women and men consider the division of household labor to be fair, although its distribution is quite uneven. In this article I report results from a survey on 404 dual-earner couples with young children living in Torino (Italy). A small proportion of wives and husbands (13.6% and 5.7% respectively) reported both unfairness and dissatisfaction with the division of housework. The absolute majority (55%) of both wives and husbands perceived fairness and satisfaction, even if most of the chores loads on wives' shoulders for about two thirds. To explain these judgments, elements of Thompson's distributive justice theoretical framework were operationalized and tested. A critical reassessment of these elements is provided, based on empirical findings.

KEYWORDS: Distributive justice, division of labor, fairness, housework

INTRODUCTION

A well-known paradox has been documented in the literature about subjective aspects of the intra-household division of housework, perceived fairness in particular: the majority of married women consider the division of household labor with their husbands to be fair, although wives actually do most of the housework and care tasks (Baxter &

Western, 1998; Blair & Johnson, 1992; Braun *et al.*, 2008; Greenstein, 1996, 2009).[1] This fact helps to understand why equality in the home is so difficult to achieve. Although the time spent in housework by women and men has changed a great deal in the last decades (Bianchi *et al.*, 2000; Gershuny, 2000; see Romano & Bruzzese, 2008 for findings about Italy), equity does not coincide with equality for most couples. Given the consequences of perceived fairness for individual well-being and marital outcomes (Claffey & Manning, 2010; Lively, 2010; Piña & Bengston, 1993; Suitor, 1991; Wilkie *et al.*, 1998), this issue seems an important topic of the research agenda on the household division of labor.

Most of the existing studies about fairness perception draws on large and nationally representative samples (e.g., International Social Survey Program, National Survey of Families and Households, etc.) whose advantages are well-known: generalizability, precise estimates, cross-country or cross-time comparability. However, testing specific hypotheses derived from theory can often only be performed indirectly or is even impossible because of the lack of variables that accurately operationalize the concepts behind them. Italy, moreover, is often excluded from analyses since it did not participate in cross-country data collection projects (e.g., ISSP 2002). Yet Italy is an interesting case study because of the relative strength of family ties and persisting traditional gender roles (Künzler, 2002; Solera, 2009: ch. 3). It is thus a good test field for theories of fairness perception.

In this article, I used a small sample survey conducted specifically to investigate the reasons why so many women and men consider an objective inequality to be fair and satisfying. For this purpose, I operationalized several concepts borrowed from Thompson's (1991) distributive justice framework and tested whether tolerance toward

inequality is raised by the outcomes of certain interpersonal comparisons, by the affective/symbolic value attached to doing housework and by specific justifications mobilized to make sense of existing arrangements.

The analysis offered here presents three improvements over previous studies: 1) it provides a better understanding of equity perception by combining perceived fairness and satisfaction ratings, which have never before been taken into account simultaneously, 2) it compares women's and men's views on the matter, which it is not often the case in prior research, and 3) it provides one of the few empirical tests and a critical re-assessment of the theoretical concepts proposed by Thompson.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND EMPIRICAL STUDIES ON HOUSEWORK AND FAIRNESS

At least three main theoretical perspectives have something to say about the sense of fairness in family relations, and have been used in most empirical research. These perspectives are social exchange theory, gender theory – particularly the "doing gender" perspective and other culturalist or symbolic interactionist viewpoints – and a strand of social psychology on distributive justice developed by Major (1987) and Thompson (1991). Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Curtis, 1986; Homans, 1961) has many points of contact with relative deprivation (Runciman, 1966) as regards the role of social comparisons, as well as with equity theory (Adams, 1965). It predicts that perceived equity depends on the input-output balance of exchange, on power relations and individual expectations. Power in social relations generates dependency, which affects fairness evaluation by lowering individual expectations: the weakest member of

the relationship is more dependent on it, and will thus have fewer alternatives to the relationship. This in turn entails that the weakest member will have lower expectations about what s/he is entitled to receive from the relationship. The social exchange perspective has been applied to the division of housework by Lennon & Rosenfield (1994) and DeMaris & Longmore (1996). The former authors found some support for the hypotheses they tested, whereas the latter's findings were not clearly in favor of the hypotheses derived from social exchange theory.

The "doing gender" approach (Deutsch, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987) has often been adopted to explain the uneven distribution of housework in the family: the so-called "gender display" or "deviance-neutralization" hypothesis would explain why women do more housework than their husbands even when they contribute more to household income (Bittman *et al.*, 2003; Brines, 1994; Evertsson & Nermo, 2004; Greenstein, 2000; see also Gupta, 2007 for a critique). A number of studies found evidence that endorsement of traditional family roles (as indicators of gender ideology) is associated with more housework time, net of economic resources and other socio-demographic characteristics (Bianchi *et al.*, 2000; Fuwa, 2004; Geist, 2005; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). The corollary of the gender approach for fairness evaluation is that the sense of justice about a given household arrangement is affected by the symbolic value attached to housework and care activities. Traditional gender ideologies and identities, reinforced by consistent behavior, legitimize and make sense of uneven distributions of household labor which are not perceived as unfair. According to Greenstein (1996, p. 31) 'gender ideology functions as a kind of lens through which inequalities in the division of household labor are viewed'. Linking gender ideology with comparison referents and relative deprivation (see Crosby, 1976), he also

concludes that ‘gender ideology serves to provide married women with a comparative referent’.

Gender theory has guided several empirical studies, which, however, found mixed evidence for it: according to Blair and Johnson (1992), gender ideology does not affect fairness judgments, while it does for DeMaris & Longmore (1996) and Baxter & Western (1998). According to Greenstein (1996), gender ideology influences fairness evaluation through its interaction with the division of housework. In a similar vein, Lavee and Katz (2002) explored the moderating effect of gender ideology on the relation between division of labour, perceived fairness and perceived marital quality. Greenstein (2009) recently returned to the issue with a comparative analysis of 30 nations. The focus here is on the effect of national contexts, which is assumed to provide women with a relevant comparison standard. His analysis confirms the hypothesized role of national contexts as moderators of the effect of inequalities (distribution of housework) on the perception of fairness: the effect is strongest in nations with high levels of gender equity. Another comparative analysis by Braun and colleagues (2008) arrived at results similar to Greenstein’s as regards the role of macro-level factors.

Social exchange, “doing gender”, and gender ideology are classic references in the study of the division of household labor and also provide useful insights on fairness perception. However, the viewpoints they offer on the latter issue are only partial. I believe that a more complete picture is given by the third theoretical perspective mentioned above – the distributive justice framework – which I will focus on in my empirical analysis. In the following, I review the literature dealing with this theoretical proposition and motivate the sample I selected to test certain hypotheses.

The distributive justice framework was developed by Thompson (1991) building on previous work by Major (1987). Thompson takes the three factors outlined by Major – outcomes values, comparison referents, and justifications – and elaborates further on them on the basis of various empirical contributions.

Outcome values are the desired outcomes that partners want from the relationship. Thompson argues that value in family relationships is not given only by the amount of time one devotes to household tasks. In other words, there is a symbolic value, displayed and exchanged in doing housework and care activities, that should not be underestimated.

Comparison referents are the standards against which the division of labor is evaluated in order to assess its fairness. Relevant referents can be other individuals or a comparison rule. What is not taken for granted is that the comparison referent must be the partner and the comparison rule be equality (50-50). According to Major (1987, 1994), within-gender comparisons are more likely to reduce feelings of injustice: when women compare themselves to other women in similar conditions or their husbands to other men, it is likely that they perceive their home arrangement as fair(er). As regards the comparison rule, much depends on how wives interpret their contribution to household income with paid and unpaid work. In other words, for women to feel entitled to more from their husbands, they have to recognize their paid work as a necessary contribution to family income and to see their housework and childcare activities as "real" work, with the same dignity as waged work.

Finally, justifications are beliefs about the appropriateness of the procedures that created the existing division of family work. Two important justifications concern "procedural justice" and standards of cleanliness. The former involves the participatory process that

led to the outcome: if women believe that decisions were made jointly, they should have fewer reasons to complain about their husbands and hence to feel unfairness. The latter is about personal preferences for cleanliness and tidiness in the house: whoever has lower standards (and hence less need) should feel entitled to be less involved in housework.[2]

The merit of Thompson's frame of analysis rests precisely in its capacity to link together various explanatory elements suggested by different and earlier theoretical perspectives. On the psychological side, the main mechanism it implies is the reduction of cognitive dissonance: objective inequalities in the distribution of housework must be accommodated either through appropriate beliefs systems (justifications and outcome values), or through an explicit recognition of injustice which eventually will entail behavioral change (i.e., a more balanced division of housework or the couple's separation in extreme cases). On the sociological side, Thompson's framework combines elements of both gender and relative deprivation theory. Comparison standards and relevant referents are also determinant factors in relative deprivation conditions, although the case of men would perhaps be better understood in terms of *relative advantage* (Leach et al., 2002). Outcome values and justifications, to a certain extent, can be conceived of as nothing but 'practical consequences' of gender ideology, since the latter is the general, abstract universe of meaning that shapes beliefs about what is the 'real' value of housework and how to assess the legitimacy of its distribution within the household.

A study dealing explicitly with Thompson's theory is Hawkins *et al.*'s research (1995), further replicated in a later study (Hawkins et al., 1998). Hawkins and his colleagues operationalized the concepts of Thompson's analytical framework and demonstrated

their direct and indirect effects on the sense of fairness, giving substantial support to the theory. Other small-sample studies (Freudenthaler & Mikula, 1998; Himsel & Goldberg, 2003; Kluwer *et al.*, 2002) also employed Thompson's framework: all found support for the effects of various comparison referents and justifications on perceived fairness. By contrast, Gager (1998) adopted a qualitative approach to explore spouses' use of justifications and to describe the specific valued aspects of housework and comparison referents among 25 dual-earner couples. From her qualitative data, she also derived some suggestions for survey data collection.

Other studies (Blair & Johnson, 1992; Gager & Hohmann-Marriot, 2006; John *et al.*, 1995; Sanchez, 1994) used Thompson's theory to interpret results of empirical research that did not measure variables directly suggested by that theoretical perspective. Although limited by similar constraints, Sanchez & Kane (1996) showed that perceived housework qualities, as an indicator of valued outcomes, were as important as predictors of fairness perception as other "pragmatic" factors. A recent study by Kawamura & Brown (2010) elaborated further on the concept of outcome values by extending its meaning to that of 'mattering', i.e. the extent to which wives believe they are important to their husbands. The authors devised a careful operationalization of this concept, which proved to be a good predictor of perceived fairness in a sample of middle-aged married women.

The present study is devoted to operationalizing concepts and testing several hypotheses derived from Thompson's theoretical framework, using a sample of dual-earner couples with young children. The choice of this specific population was motivated by the fact that fairness in the division of domestic tasks is likely to be a much more salient issue in

this kind of household because parents, especially mothers, are often under time pressure from the competing demands of work and caregiving responsibilities.

Thompson's distributive justice framework does not explicitly apply to dual-earner couples only, although the author often refers to Hochschild's (1989) qualitative analysis of dual-earner couples to exemplify and justify her reasoning. Yet, even if there are no specific reasons to assume that this framework cannot be applied to the whole population of couples, it seems more sensible to test its empirical consequences on dual-earner couples, since housework inequalities are more likely the topic of discussion and disagreement among such couples. This is particularly true in Italy, where dual-earner couples (especially with children) are not yet the norm and working mothers experience considerable difficulties in balancing work and family responsibilities. Therefore, if Thompson's hypotheses are true, their validity can be displayed most clearly here. In previous research specifically addressing the operationalization of Thompson's concepts (see above), four out of five studies focused on small samples of dual-earner couples (Freudenthaler & Mikula, 1998; Hawkins *et al.*, 1998; Hawkins *et al.*, 1995; Himsel & Goldberg, 2003). In other studies dealing with the general topic of perceived fairness, the target population was either dual-earner or all couples; in some cases analyses were kept separated for employed and non employed women (Blair & Johnson, 1992).

THE PRESENT STUDY: DATA AND MEASURES

Survey description

The target population consists of dual-earner couples, with at least one child up to 12 years old, living in Torino and the surrounding metropolitan area. Torino is located in North-West Italy, in a region with a relatively high rate of female employment: in Piemonte, the region of which Torino is the administrative capital, the employment rate of women aged 15-64 was 56.3% in 2007, as opposed to 46.6% for Italy as a whole. In this respect, Torino is more representative of metropolitan areas in North-Central Italy. However, if we consider dual-earner couples, couples in Torino are quite similar to Italian ones as a whole. To ascertain this, I preliminarily analyzed a sample of dual-earner couples drawn from the latest available time-use survey (2002-03) conducted in Italy by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT). This survey includes an oversampling of Torino. I found small differences in terms of education, family size, and paid work time between couples living in different regions of the country. Narrowing the observation to dual-earner couples living in metropolitan areas (comparable to Torino) these small differences disappear, although the division of domestic labor continues to be more gendered in the South, whereas it is a bit more even in Torino than elsewhere (see Carriero, 2009).

This finding could cast doubts on results drawn from the sample used in this article since a more balanced division of housework is likely to influence perceived fairness and satisfaction.[3] However, the division of domestic labor is not my main independent variable. Even if a less gendered division of housework can contribute to increasing the general level of perceived fairness and satisfaction in my sample, it is unlikely that it can decisively alter the effect of the other variables (interpersonal comparisons, outcome values and justifications) and thus does not invalidate the results presented here.

The sample for this study was randomly chosen from landline telephone directories.[4] Data collection took place from November 2008 to February 2009 (excluding holiday weeks). Both partners in each couple were interviewed separately by telephone. Eligibility conditions for the interview were: 1) both partners must have been employed in the last 6 months and be currently (self-)employed; 2) they must have at least one child under the age of thirteen; 3) both partners should be available for interview. The response rate for couples of known eligibility was 63%. However, it was not possible to ascertain the eligibility status for a number of contacts who refused the interview. By including them in the computation, the overall response rate's lower bound becomes 28%.[5] The final sample size was 404 couples with information from both partners.

The questionnaire was designed to collect information on various topics relevant to the issues under investigation: time-use information (paid and unpaid work); individual and household demographics; retrospective information on work history; judgments (fairness and satisfaction ratings for the division of housework and childcare with the partner); attitudes related to family and housework (gender roles, personal preferences for cleanliness, comparison referents and other items inspired by Thompson & Major's theory of distributive justice within the family). The average duration of the interviews was 30 minutes, ranging from 20 to 40 minutes. Details about the variables used in my analyses are given below.[6]

Response variables

Fairness and satisfaction judgments are response variables that, suitably combined, represent the dependent variable of multinomial logistic regressions. Fairness perception was probed with a 5-point Likert-type item:

> *Regarding the division of housework with your partner, do you personally think that what you do is much more than fair, a bit more than fair, fair, a little less than fair or much less than fair?*

Satisfaction was assessed with the following question:

> *How much are you satisfied with the division of housework with your partner?* (4-point scale)

Although one could plausibly assume that (dis)satisfaction is a consequence of (un) fairness (Baxter & Western, 1998), it seems safer to proceed as if both items were partial measures of an underlying concept – 'sense of justice' – which involves perception of equity and satisfaction feeling. I decided to derive a single indicator from the cross-classification of the two items, thus producing a typology. In this way one can understand which aspects of the concept are affected by different independent variables because regression analysis will treat fairness and satisfaction together while leaving these two dimensions distinct and recognizable.

When combining fairness and satisfaction, I aggregated several categories of the cross-classification (see next section for details) and dropped several others because of small cell size and/or little theoretical relevance. The wife's judgment of the division of housework has three outcomes in multivariate analyses: fair & satisfied, more than fair but satisfied, more than fair & dissatisfied. The husband's judgment also has three outcomes: fair & satisfied, less than fair but satisfied, less than fair & dissatisfied.

Predictor variables

As my purpose is to evaluate how elements other than time and tasks influence judgments of the division of household labor, I primarily tried to assess the effect of the elements proposed by Thompson (1991), namely the outcome values of family work, the comparison referents and the justifications used for making judgments. Following previous work by Hawkins, Marshall *et al.* (1995), under constraints imposed by the need to have a relatively short questionnaire, respondents were asked to answer several questions that were intended to operationalize these theoretical elements. I selected a few of them for this analysis. Specifically, the outcome value of family work reported here consists of 'feelings of appreciation'. The corresponding item, rated on a 5-point scale, is:

I feel appreciated by my husband (my wife) when I do household tasks

According to the theory, this item should be correlated with the sense of justice: the feeling of appreciation from the partner rewards for (at least part of) the effort devoted to housework.

To investigate comparison referents relevant to fairness issues wives and husbands were asked to make four comparisons. The wife had to compare herself to her mother and to her female friends (in the same conditions, i.e., married or partnered, with children and employed); she also had to compare her husband to her father and to her (female) friends' husbands. The husband had to make the same comparisons, changing the sex of the comparison referents (i.e., self to his father, wife to his mother, self to his male friends, and wife to his friends' wives). In all cases, respondents were asked to say if

their own (or their spouse's) housework time was about equal, lower or higher than the comparison referent. These are all items about within-gender comparisons: s/he has to compare her/him self with other women (men) or her/his partner with other men (women). No directly probed cross-gender comparisons are available in this survey.

Lastly, for the justifications used to rationalize and make sense of feelings of fairness/satisfaction, I concentrate on two main arguments: difference in standards of cleanliness and 'procedural justice', i.e., shared agreement over the division of housework. Standards were measured indirectly by means of three items, inspired and partly adapted from Ogletree, Worthen *et al.* (2006), that were specifically designed to measure personal preferences about cleanliness:

Leaving dirty dishes in the sink overnight bothers me.

I can't stand it if the bathroom is cleaned less than twice a week.

I don't care much if the house is messy.

After averaging ratings (ranging 1 to 5, third item reversed), I took the difference between wife's and husband's scores in order to have a measure which is independent of explicit comparisons. The higher the difference, the higher her standards compared to his'. The hypothesis linked to this variable is that whoever has lower standards should feel entitled to be less involved in housework and thus s/he should also care less about inequality in the division of chores. Conversely, those who have higher standards– usually women – invest more time in housework to meet them, but do not perceive this extra investment to be unfair.

The 'procedural justice' justification is represented by the following item (1-5 point scale, adapted from Hawkins *et al.* 1995):

My husband (wife) and I decided together and agreed regarding who does what about household chores and childcare tasks.

Spouses who agree with this item should tolerate inequality better, on the grounds that if they believe that decisions were made jointly, they should have fewer reasons to complain afterwards. However, it should be borne in mind that asymmetries in power relations could lead to "agreements" on a quite different basis.

Since the issue under examination involves explaining why spouses consider a division of housework that is objectively uneven to be fair and satisfying, it is important to control for the actual allocation of household labor. The division of unpaid labor was measured with several indexes derived from a set of questions about 13 household and childcare tasks (such as cooking and preparing meals, washing the dishes, vacuuming, ironing, shopping for groceries, etc.) that summarizes the percentage of activities personally performed out the total of activities performed by the family. Respondents (wives and husband separately) were asked first how many times each activity was performed in her/his family in total. They were then requested to say who performs each task and how often. Answer options were: 'always me', 'much more often me', 'slightly more often me', 'equally shared with my partner', slightly more often my partner', 'much more often my partner', 'always my partner' and 'mostly others' (i.e., other household members, relatives or paid help).

The index derived from these questions combines the frequency of activities with the proportion of performance.[7] For example, if 'vacuuming & cleaning' was performed 2-3 times a week, and was equally shared by the partners, this item contributes to the index with 2.5*0.5 = 1.75 activities done by the wife. I created different versions of the index,

summing different types of tasks: a 'core housework index', including routine domestic tasks only (cooking, cleaning, washing dishes, doing laundry, ironing, tidying-up); a 'sporadic housework index', including shopping and non-routine domestic tasks (home and car maintenance, financial and administrative tasks); and a 'childcare index', including feeding, dressing, reading to children, taking children to/from school or other out-of-home activities.[8]

The percentage of the couple's net monthly income earned by the wife is a variable intended to measure her economic power, which can affect perceived fairness either indirectly (through its influence on the division of housework) or directly (perhaps through the mechanism of cognitive dissonance reduction). However, my focus of interest is not the exchange hypothesis and I consider the percentage of income earned by the wife as control. As the allocation of paid work is also likely to affect fairness and satisfaction considerations, I computed an index measuring the percentage of couple's paid labor hours performed by the wife. Other variables, used as simple controls, are respondent's age and education, and the number of children.

ANALYSES

Although none of the previous studies considered fairness and satisfaction simultaneously, this study replicates the main finding: the absolute majority of women (55.4%) and, less surprisingly, of men (55%) is satisfied and considers the housework to be fairly divided with the partner (see Table 1 and 2). Small proportions of wives (13.6%) and husbands (5.7%) report both unfairness and dissatisfaction. About a quarter of wives and a third of husbands acknowledge doing an unfair share of housework (i.e.,

more than fair and less than fair respectively), but nonetheless consider themselves satisfied. Other combinations of perceived fairness and satisfaction, namely 'less than fair & satisfied' among women and 'more than fair & satisfied' among men, although theoretically interesting (as 'innovative' or counter-intuitive positions), are characteristic of very few cases (3% of women and men) and are not further investigated in this study.

[table 1 & 2 here]

These preliminary descriptive findings show that there can be a disjunction – whose origin should be investigated – between perceived unfairness and dissatisfaction. The former is frequently recognized by social actors, but the latter does not necessarily follow, perhaps because other factors (such as the need to avoid cognitive dissonance or desire to prevent conflict) intervene first.

The apparent paradox of these judgments is that women and men report satisfaction and fairness even if the housework distribution is far from being even. The 'golden rule' of housework allocation appears to be 2/3 to the wife and 1/3 to the husband. Looking at the shares of housework (calculated through respondents' subjective information), it seems that, for women, even small departures from this rule lead to an unfairness verdict, and substantive departures add dissatisfaction to unfairness. For men, departures from the 'golden rule' also result in a perception of unfairness (in both directions: to him and to her), but among those who admit that what they do is less than fair, the level of satisfaction does not depend on the (perceived) amount of housework done, which is on average 25% for both satisfied and dissatisfied husbands.

It is possible that a reason for dissatisfaction arises from different partners' perceptions about what proportion of the housework is actually done by each. That this is possible is indicated by comparing housework allocation as calculated from subjective information reported by wives and husbands. As shown in Table 3, dissatisfaction seems to arise when there is a substantive difference (10 points) between what husband and wife perceive about the 'real' amount of housework allocated to her (in the case of husbands reporting 'more than fair but satisfied', there is also a substantive difference between the two spouses' perceptions, but it must be taken with caution since it is based on only 12 observations).

[table 3 here]

For the following multivariate analyses, I dropped the categories of the nominal dependent variables that contained too few observations. I am left with three outcomes of the wife's and husband's judgment (shaded cells of Table 2 and 3): fair & satisfied (reference category for both), unfair but satisfied, unfair & dissatisfied (for wives, unfair means that she does *more than fair*, for husbands that he does *less than fair*).

The purpose of the multivariate analyses is to estimate the effects of the variables representing outcome values, comparison referents and justifications, net of theoretically relevant antecedent and concomitant variables. Consistently with this purpose, I will consider each variable at a time in separate regressions, focusing my remarks only on the variable of interest.[9]

I included the following controls in the regression models: the Respondent's percentage of core housework, the R's percentage of sporadic housework, the R's percentage of

childcare tasks – the distinction between kinds of household tasks is needed to account for their different practical and symbolic meanings – and the percentage of paid work hours performed by the wife as variables taking equity considerations across the main domains of time allocation into account; R's age, years of education and the number of children as socio-demographic controls; wife's relative income as a variable that controls for power asymmetries affecting the division of housework.

Because of the observational and cross-sectional nature of this study, the independent variables' causal status is questionable: frequently, we cannot rule out that certain relations between variables run the other way around. For example, the choice of specific comparison referents from the class of 'friends in similar conditions' can be a function of the respondent's fairness and satisfaction perceptions in order to justify his/her judgment, or the feeling of being not appreciated by the partner when doing housework can be a consequence of dissatisfaction with the division of tasks. Unfortunately, I cannot test these hypotheses with available data, and this remains a limitation of this study to be addressed in future research.

I start the analysis by presenting results that highlight the importance of various comparison referents for men and women. To save space, I do not show the full set of regressions (available upon request from the author), but only those yielding the most significant and interesting results. Out of the four kinds of (within-gender) comparison referents, 'mother' and 'father' do not appear to influence wives' and husbands' perceptions of fairness and satisfaction (results not shown), although in the case of the wife's father-husband comparison it seems that when her father was absent (referent unavailable), she is more likely to judge the division of housework to be unfair.

[table 4 & 5 here]

As for the other referents, I found that husbands are more likely to feel that the situation is unfair to their wives when they believe they do less housework than their friends (the effect is stronger for the outcome 'unfair but satisfied' than 'unfair & dissatisfied', see Table 4), but the same does not hold for women. When the reverse is true, i.e., when men believe their friends do less housework than themselves, the comparison does not significantly affect their judgment: the comparison effect is not symmetrical. The probability that a man perceives unfairness and dissatisfaction is also higher when he believes that his wife does more housework than other wives, but the reverse is not true (as one would expect it to be) when he thinks that his wife does less housework (results not shown).

For wives, the relevant comparison referents are other husbands compared to their own: if women believe their husbands are contributing less to housework than other (known) husbands, they are more likely to report unfairness and dissatisfaction, but not unfairness with satisfaction (coefficients not significant, see Table 5).

To have a concrete idea of how comparison referents influence the judgment, let us consider predicted probabilities: for a woman with average characteristics (control variables held at their sample mean or median), the probability that she will report unfairness and dissatisfaction is less than 3% when she believes her husband does more housework than other husbands, whereas it rises to 27% in the opposite case. For men, the effect is weaker: the predicted probability of reporting unfairness and dissatisfaction is 4% when they believe their friends do not differ from themselves in time spent on

household labor, but that probability increases only up to 12% when husbands think their friends do more housework than themselves.

Finally, I report results from other regression analyses, where I consider the effects of outcome values and justifications.

[table 6 and 7 here]

The feeling of appreciation perceived when doing housework seems to affect satisfaction only in conjunction with the sense of fairness: when the wife (the husband) reports appreciation, it is less likely that she (he) feels dissatisfaction and unfairness. Shared agreement over the distribution of tasks has no effect on husbands' judgments, whereas, as expected, it is negatively associated with wives' perception of unfairness and dissatisfaction (results not shown). Again, as in the case of appreciation, this argument seems to be mobilized to compensate for the cognitive dissonance generated by an unfair allocation.

[table 8 and 9 here]

The difference between wife's and husband's standards of cleanliness, measured indirectly as mentioned above, has effects on both spouses' judgments, but they are contrary to expectations. It was thought that this variable alleviates the sense of unfairness and dissatisfaction on the grounds that the partner with higher standards (usually the wife) would feel less entitled to complain about the division of housework.

On the contrary, the findings show that the higher the difference between the spouses' preferences about the level of cleanliness, the higher the probability that partners (both wives and husbands) will find the allocation of housework unfair and dissatisfying (for husbands, this also seems to alter the sense of fairness regardless of the level of satisfaction, as witnessed by the positive coefficient for the 'unfair but satisfied' outcome).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Although this study provides supporting evidence for each of the specific explanatory variables suggested by Thompson's theoretical framework and taken into consideration here, a number of remarks should be made. The role of outcome values, and feelings of appreciation in particular, was found to be significant for both wives and husbands, but seems to influence satisfaction rather than perceived fairness (note that this result could emerge because fairness and satisfaction were combined and analyzed simultaneously, as otherwise they would have partially overlapped, confounding the analysis). This finding suggests that valued outcomes could represent some sort of ex-post rationalization for unfair allocations, which must nevertheless be accommodated for the internal consistency of actors' beliefs system. If this is plausible, the role of valued outcomes is not conceptually very different from that of justifications. Of course, as mentioned, the cross-sectional nature of the data at hand does not permit a true causal interpretation of the relationship between feelings of appreciation and satisfaction/fairness.

Processes of social comparison are certainly at work in fairness judgments, and there is at least a reference behavior (i.e., men's) common to both husbands and wives, although in the former case comparison referents are friends whereas in the latter they are other (male) individuals in a different position (not necessarily friends). For women, the comparison between their husband and other husbands is relevant, but only so far as the 'unfair & dissatisfied' judgment is concerned; comparisons with their mother, father and female friends do not significantly influence women's judgment.[10] For men, friends and friends' wives are relevant comparison referents, not mothers or fathers. Comparisons with friends are likely to make husbands feel 'guilty' (i.e., to perceive unfairness to the wife) if they believe their friends contribute more to the housework, while comparisons between their own wife and other wives increase the likelihood that they report unfairness with dissatisfaction, when men believe that their wife does more housework than other wives. Except for husbands' comparisons of themselves and their friends, all comparisons are associated with the probability of reporting unfairness *and* dissatisfaction, not simply unfairness. Indeed, as the relative deprivation literature suggests, feelings of dissatisfaction are prompted by social comparison with relevant referents.

All of the above are within-gender comparisons (i.e., husbands comparing themselves to other men and their wives to other women, and wives behaving symmetrically) which, according to Thompson, should foster perceived fairness. Indeed, I do not have a clear indication that within-gender as opposed to cross-gender comparison referents influence fairness perception – probably measures other than those available here would be required – but I do not see good reasons to presume that the two kinds of comparisons are in opposition. Furthermore, since a cross-gender comparison is basically the

comparison with his/her own partner, its effect might be assessed indirectly from the coefficient of the housework ratio or proportion, as in Gager & Hohmann-Marriot (2006). However, a more relevant question would be: which characteristics of women and men or which social contexts prompt them to make within- or cross-gender comparisons? This is an old and unresolved theoretical problem – 'Who compares with whom?' (Gartrell, 2002) – and perhaps calls into question the role of gender ideologies which, according to Greenstein (1996), should influence the choice of comparison referents. Greenstein (2009) also maintains that national contexts provide individuals with a generalized comparative referent and that in nations where gender inequality is more pronounced couple-level inequalities are more likely to be considered fair. As this likely applies to Italy, interpersonal comparisons have here a more salient significance. For an Italian woman it will be easier to find that her husband is more collaborative than average if this average is quite "low" (a similar reasoning applies to Italian men). I believe that this aspect should be investigated in greater depth and in comparative perspective in future empirical research, for example by collecting information on the characteristics of the couple's social network: how many friends of both sexes, how frequently met, the degree of friends' socio-cultural heterogeneity, etc.[11]

The role of justifications, as conceptualized and measured in this study, is more controversial. The 'procedural justice' argument worked as expected among wives who are less likely to report unfairness *and* dissatisfaction if they agreed on the allocation of tasks with their husbands. For husbands, however, no association was found between this justification and their judgment, perhaps revealing that it is a kind of gendered rationalization that serves to alleviate women's sense of injustice but does not lighten men's consciousness of their unfair contribution to housework.

The other justification examined, namely the difference in cleanliness standards between partners, had a completely unexpected effect on fairness and satisfaction: the higher the difference (meaning that the wife is more demanding), the higher the probability that she reports unfairness and dissatisfaction or that the husband perceives unfairness toward his wife. This result could mean that the wife is disappointed that her husband will not help reach the desired level of cleanliness and tidiness at home; alternatively, for men, it could signify that they are aware of their inadequate contribution to housework and, precisely for that reason, are more likely to acknowledge the unfairness of the burden they pass on to the wife. More generally, the difference in standards could signal a disagreement potential which raises the salience of conflict in the relationship and thus makes the perception of injustice more likely (Molm et al., 2006).

These are of course post-hoc interpretations for unexpected results. On the other hand, justifications, like all ex-post rationalizations, lend themselves to multiple and contradictory uses. In this respect, justifications are the weakest element of Thompson's theoretical framework. However, if the post-hoc interpretation of the 'difference in standards' effect is valid, it can be grounded in a relative deprivation mechanism: a woman who has higher standards of cleanliness than her partner feels deprived – i.e., perceives more unfairness and dissatisfaction – because she knows he will not cooperate in achieving that standard.

All in all, Thompson's conceptual framework remains a useful tool for analyzing fairness perception about the division of family labor. It invites the researcher to pay attention not only to practical aspects of household and care tasks but also to a wide

range of symbolic meanings and values and to the embeddedness of spouses in a host of social relationships that provide them with multiple occasions of comparison.

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NOTES

1 I use "wife" and "husband" to refer to both married and cohabiting persons.
2 Kaufmann (1993: cp. 5) also recognized the problematic nature of the difference between her standards and his', acknowledging that a "separation of territories" (i.e., a specialisation in the tasks that one cares more about) is functional to the preservation of harmony.
3 Indeed, from the time-use survey mentioned in the text, it turns out that women in dual-earner couples living in the South are slightly less satisfied with the division of housework than women living in the North or in the Center.
4 This choice may have led to some selection bias towards more highly educated people. Telephone directory coverage for the target population is not known for the period in which fieldwork was conducted. Though the most recent estimate (2003, based on data provided by ISTAT) was 95%, it is likely that coverage was lower at the end of 2008.
5 Since it is unlikely that all unknown refusals were out of target, the true response rate is likely to be higher than 28%.
6 Micro-data and survey documentation are freely available from the website www.torinosociallab.org. English versions of the questionnaire are available upon request from the author.
7 The values I attributed to the weekly frequency of execution are: 14 (every day, more than once), 7 (once a day), 4.5 (4-5 times per week), 2.5 (2-3 times per week), 1 (once a week), 0.25 (less often). For the sharing of tasks, I use the following proportions: 1(always me), 0.85 (much more often me), 0.65 (slightly more often me), 0.5 (equally shared with my partner), 0.35 (slightly more often my partner), 0.15 (much more often my partner), 0 (always my partner).
8 I used the index derived from wives' answers to household items to analyse wives' judgments, and husbands' answers to analyse husbands' judgments. Men's and women's perceptions about the frequency of task execution are different at the couple level and it seemed better and more consistent to use the same source of information for regressing fairness and satisfaction ratings.
9 This model specification style – looking for the effects of a given cause – is at odds with approaches that try to include all the possible 'determinants' of a given effect (Gelman & Hill, 2007: part 1B; Sobel, 1996). In any case, the moderate sample size would not make it possible to include many predictors in the models, considering that in multinomial logistic regression the number of parameters to be estimated grows with the number of response variable categories.

10 To borrow terminology from Wright and Tropp (2002), perceived unfairness with satisfaction can be described as *cognitive relative deprivation*, and unfairness with dissatisfaction as *affective relative deprivation.*

11 Interpersonal comparisons has not received much attention in the housework literature. With few exceptions (Buunk *et al.*, 2000; Gager, 1998 for instance) comparisons were usually treated as "exogenous" (e.g. something that individuals are simply exposed to), while they could be "endogenous" as well (e.g. something that individuals actively seek to justify their feelings). Agent-based simulation is a technique that seems particularly well suited for studying the role of social comparisons in the genesis of relative deprivation sentiments (for an example see Manzo, 2011).

TABLES

Table 1 Cross-classification of wives' fairness perceptions and satisfaction ratings (percentage share of core housework performed in italics in brackets)

She is… / She thinks what she does is…	Not very/ not at all satisfied	Fairly/ very much satisfied
A little less/ much less than fair	0.5% n=2 -	3.2% n=13 *(53.9)*
Fair	2.0% n=8 -	55.4% n=224 *(66.5)*
A bit more/ much more than fair	13.6% n=55 *(82.1)*	25.3% n=102 *(70.9)*

Table 2 Cross-classification of husbands' fairness perceptions and satisfaction ratings (percentage share of core housework performed in italics in brackets)

He is… / He thinks what he does is…	Not very/ not at all satisfied	Fairly/ very much satisfied
A little less/ much less than fair	5.7% n=23 *(25.3)*	35.6% n=144 *(25.5)*
Fair	0.5% n=2 -	55.0% n=222 *(32.5)*
A bit more/ much more than fair	0.2% n=1 -	3.0% n=12 *(42.0)*

Table 3 Wife's share of core housework (%) according to her and to him, by wife's and husband's judgment

	Wife's % of housework calculated through…		
Wife's judgment	W's information	H's information	Difference W-H
fair & satisfied	66.5	63.0	3.5
more than fair but satisfied	70.9	64.6	6.3
more than fair & dissatisfied	82.1	72.5	9.6
less than fair but satisfied	53.9	55.6	-1.7
Husband's judgment			
fair & satisfied	65.4	61.0	4.4
less than fair but satisfied	74.7	70.1	4.6
less than fair & dissatisfied	84.8	74.2	10.6
more than fair but satisfied	66.4	55.3	11.1

Table 4 Effects of comparison referents on wives' judgments, multinomial logistic regressions coefficients

	more than fair & satisfied vs. fair & satisfied		more than fair & dissatisfied vs. fair & satisfied	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
Compared to other husbands…				
Her husband does less housework	0.40	0.42	1.50**	0.47
Her husband does more housework	-0.23	0.28	-1.32**	0.49
She does not know	-0.88	0.82	0.68	0.69
(Ref.: her husband does same housework)				
R's % of core housework	0.02*	0.01	0.06**	0.01
R's % of sporadic housework	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01
R's % of childcare tasks	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01
Age	0.03	0.03	0.10**	0.04
No. of children	0.10	0.20	-0.41	0.32
Years education	-0.01	0.04	0.03	0.06
Wife's % of paid work hours	0.04*	0.02	0.07**	0.03
Wife's % of couple's income	-0.01	0.01	0.00	0.02
Constant	-4.83**	1.79	-13.73**	2.67

N = 381

Note: +: p<0.1 *: p<0.05 **: p<0.01

Table 5 Effects of comparison referents on husbands' judgments, multinomial logistic regressions coefficients

	less than fair & satisfied vs. fair & satisfied		less than fair & dissatisfied vs. fair & satisfied	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
Compared to his friends…				
He does more housework	-0.29	0.25	-0.26	0.57
He does less housework	1.09**	0.38	1.66**	0.63
He does not know	-0.55	0.56	0.54	0.89
(ref.: He does same housework)				
R's % of core housework	-0.03**	0.01	-0.03+	0.02
R's % of sporadic housework	0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.01
R's % of childcare tasks	0.00	0.01	-0.01	0.02
Age	0.03	0.02	0.10*	0.04
No. of children	-0.21	0.19	-0.11	0.39
Years education	0.07*	0.03	0.00	0.06
Wife's % of paid work hours	-0.02	0.02	0.00	0.03
Wife's % of couple's income	0.00	0.01	0.02	0.02
Constant	-0.67	1.11	-5.48*	2.33

N = 388

Note: +: p<0.1 *: p<0.05 **: p<0.01

Table 6 Effects of 'feelings of appreciation' on wives' judgments, multinomial logistic regressions coefficients

	more than fair fair & satisfied vs. fair & satisfied		more than fair & dissatisfied vs. fair & satisfied	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
She feels appreciated by partner when doing housework (recoded item, 1 = yes)	-0.27	0.25	-1.24**	0.36
R's % of core housework	0.02*	0.01	0.08**	0.01
R's % of sporadic housework	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.01
R's % of childcare tasks	0.01	0.01	0.03*	0.01
Age	0.03	0.03	0.10**	0.04
No. of children	0.12	0.20	-0.30	0.31
Years education	-0.02	0.04	0.01	0.06
Wife's % of paid work hours	0.04*	0.02	0.06*	0.03
Wife's % of couple's income	-0.01	0.01	0.01	0.02
Constant	-4.69**	1.72	-15.10**	2.57

N = 381

Note: +: p<0.1 *: p<0.05 **: p<0.01

Table 7 Effects of 'feelings of appreciation' on husbands' judgments, multinomial logistic regressions coefficients

	less than fair & satisfied vs. fair & satisfied		less than fair & dissatisfied vs. fair & satisfied	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
He feels appreciated by partner when doing housework (recoded item, 1 = yes)	-0.18	0.31	-1.04*	0.51
R's % of core housework	-0.03**	0.01	-0.04*	0.02
R's % of sporadic housework	0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.01
R's % of childcare tasks	0.00	0.01	-0.02	0.02
Age	0.03	0.02	0.10*	0.04
No. of children	-0.23	0.19	-0.05	0.37
Years education	0.06*	0.03	-0.02	0.06
Wife's % of paid work hours	-0.02	0.02	0.00	0.03
Wife's % of couple's income	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.02
Constant	0.08	1.10	-3.73	2.28

N = 388

Note: +: p<0.1 *: p<0.05 **: p<0.01

Table 8 Effects of 'difference in standards' on wives' judgments, multinomial logistic regressions coefficients

	more than fair & satisfied vs. fair & satisfied		more than fair & dissatisfied vs. fair & satisfied	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
Difference in standards of cleanliness (higher scores = higher wife's standards)	-0.09	0.09	0.25*	0.12
R's % of core housework	0.02	0.01	0.07**	0.01
R's % of sporadic housework	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01
R's % of childcare tasks	0.00	0.01	0.02+	0.01
Age	0.03	0.03	0.11	0.04
No. of children	0.12	0.20	-0.31	0.30
Years education	-0.01	0.04	0.03	0.05
Wife's % of paid work hours	0.04*	0.02	0.06*	0.02
Wife's % of couple's income	-0.01	0.01	0.01	0.02
Constant	-5.02**	1.72	-15.34**	2.53

N = 381

Note: +: p<0.1 *: p<0.05 **: p<0.01

Table 9 Effects of 'difference in standards' on husbands' judgments, multinomial logistic regressions coefficients

	less than fair & satisfied vs. fair & satisfied		less than fair & dissatisfied vs. fair & satisfied	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
Difference in standards of cleanliness (higher scores = higher wife's standards)	0.25**	0.08	0.32+	0.17
R's % of core housework	-0.03*	0.01	-0.03*	0.02
R's % of sporadic housework	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01
R's % of childcare tasks	0.00	0.01	-0.01	0.02
Age	0.03	0.02	0.09*	0.04
No. of children	-0.21	0.19	-0.07	0.38
Years education	0.05	0.03	-0.03	0.06
Wife's % of paid work hours	-0.02	0.02	-0.01	0.03
Wife's % of couple's income	0.01	0.01	0.02+	0.02
Constant	-0.19	1.08	-4.52*	2.20

N = 388

Note: +: p<0.1 *: p<0.05 **: p<0.01